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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that literacy practices are a key site for the construction of gender in society and that widening the range of discourses available to both boys and girls is important to expanding the possibilities for how they construct their definitions of masculinity and femininity. A study compared children's responses to picture storybooks that portray characters in nontraditional gender roles before dramatization and after dramatization of the stories. It is part of a larger study that investigates the ways children's gender identity influences their construction of meaning in peer-led literature discussion groups as they discuss books in which the characters portray nontraditional roles and/or traits, as well as investigating how transmediation sustains or transforms participants' awareness of gender identities. Research was conducted in a third-grade classroom in a K-6 rural midwestern elementary school (a professional development school). Participants (n=24) were white and from mid to low socioeconomic backgrounds. Children read two picture storybooks portraying nontraditional males and two picture storybooks with nontraditional female gender portrayal and rated them. Children then spent two hours on three separate days preparing dramatizations and presented their dramatizations to the class. After dramatization, children rated the stories again according to how much they liked the book and explained their rationale for their rating. Results indicated that dramatizing stories affected children's responses to a story in which the characters are portrayed in nontraditional roles in a positive manner, especially boys. Ratings for both of the books portraying nontraditional males increased the most. (Contains 3 tables and 20 references.) (NKA)

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by Peggy S. Rice

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Examining the Effectiveness of Entering the Story World of Characters Portraying Diverse Gender Roles

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Purpose

As we work towards creating a more just social order, how do we create spaces for children to expand their definitions of femininity and masculinity beyond stereotypical definitions? Research suggests that literacy practices are a key site for the construction of gender in society and that widening the range of discourses available to both boys and girls is important to expanding the possibilities for how they construct their definitions of masculinity and femininity (Cherland, 1994; Gilbert, 1991; Martino, 1994; Young, 1998). Authors have provided children's books in which the characters are portrayed in nonstereotypical roles (Phelps, 1978; Munsch, 1980); however, children are unable to identify with the character in the nontraditional role (Trousdale, 1995), in fact transforming nontraditional characteristics into traditional characteristics when they recall the story (Trousdale, 1995; Rice, 2000). Thus, simply providing children with these books is not enough to expand their definitions of masculinity and femininity (Davies, 1989; Trousdale, 1995).

Educational drama provides children with opportunities to "*believe* in the possibility of their character" (Wolf, 1994). With this in mind, is educational drama a method to create spaces for children to expand their definitions of masculinity and femininity, specifically when children dramatize books in which the characters are portrayed in nontraditional gender roles? The current research compares children's responses to picture storybooks that portray characters in nontraditional gender roles before dramatization and after dramatization of the stories. It is part of a larger study that investigates the ways children's gender identity influences their

construction of meaning in peer-led literature discussion groups as they discuss books in which the characters portray nontraditional roles and/or traits, as well as investigating how transmediation sustains or transforms participants' awareness of gender identities.

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivists such as Vygotsky (1987, 1978) foreground the importance of social interaction in learning and the need for social interactions that enable us to build on and extend previous understandings. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) emphasizes that our social interactions do not necessarily generate new understandings. For Bakhtin, new links of meaning are forged only when we engage in "dialogue" in which two perspectives intermingle to generate new points of view, new positions, and new understandings. Educational drama, such as classroom theater (a blend of creative drama and readers theatre), provides opportunities for children to explore alternate ways of thinking as they enter into the world of the story (e.g. Edmiston & Wilhelm 1998; Wolf, Edmiston & Enciso, 1997). For example, the participants in Edmiston and Wilhelm 1998) were able to "walk in the shoes" of the characters and demonstrated a deeper understanding of the social injustice of slavery. Research incorporating educational drama has not focused on gender; however, previous research investigating children's gender positioning indicates a dualistic positioning of masculinity and femininity (e.g. Davies, 1989; Martino, 1994; Young, 1998) and a lack of association towards characters portrayed in nontraditional roles (Trousdale, 1995; Rice, 2000). The present study investigates the influence of classroom theater on children' responses to books in which the characters are portrayed in nontraditional gender roles. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1. How does classroom theater affect children's rating of a book portraying nontraditional gender characteristics?

2. Are differences apparent between the sexes?

3. What is the nature of any differences that occurred?

Methods

I conducted this study in a third grade classroom in a K-6 rural midwestern elementary school that is a professional development school. Twenty-four students, fifteen boys and nine girls participated in the study. All of the children are White and from mid to low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Three days a week during the first five weeks of the school year I was in the classroom as a moderate participant as I "sought to maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider" (Spradley, 1980, p. 60). During this time, I established rapport with the children by eating lunch with them, actively participating in their games at recess, and working with them in the classroom as an assistant to their teacher.

In the sixth week of school, I began my primary data collection facilitating the literacy activities for the research project as the children' language arts instruction. The classroom teacher became my assistant during this time. During the span of two weeks the children read two picture storybooks portraying nontraditional males; *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979) and *Wilfrid Gordon MacDonald Partridge* (Fox, 1985) and two picture storybooks with nontraditional female gender portrayal; *Horace and Morris, but mostly Dolores* (Howe, 1999) and *The Paperbag Princess* (Munsch, 1980). For each book, the same procedure was followed. First, the children read the book silently, and then they answered guided response questions individually in writing, such as "What would you have done if you were (main character's name)?" They also generated two questions that they wanted to discuss in their peer-led literature discussion groups and rated how much they liked each book on a rating scale of one to

three writing an explanation of their rating below each rating scale. On the rating scale, number three denoted "liked it a lot;" number two denoted "liked it ok;" and, number one denoted "didn't like it." Then, they met in peer-led literature discussion groups to discuss the story. After that, in a whole class discussion each group shared aspects of their discussion. The next day, groups of children worked together in peer-led groups creating scripts and dramatizing the stories. They spent two hours on three separate days preparing their dramatizations. Then, each group presented their dramatization to the class. After dramatizing the stories, the children rated the stories again according to how much they liked the book and explaining their rationale for their rating.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

The data for this part of the larger study consists of the ratings the children selected for the stories before they created the scripts, and the ratings they selected for the stories after they dramatized the stories, as well as their written comments explaining their ratings. I tabulated the children' ratings of the stories both before and after the dramatizations and calculated separate percentages for the percent of boys and girls who increased their rating of the story after they had an opportunity to enact it. I also conducted crosstabulations of the ratings before and after dramatization. I clustered the children' written responses according to whether they are positive, negative, or neutral (Beach, 1983).

Results

The frequency of the ratings for the boys and the girls are summarized in the tables below (Number one denoted "didn't like it;" number three denoted "liked it ok;" and, number five denoted "liked it a lot."):

Table 1

Frequency of Ratings for the Stories with Nontraditional Female Gender Portrayal Before and After Dramatization

Stories with Nontraditional Male Gender Portrayal	Oliver Button is a Sissy						Wilfrid Gordon MacDonald Partridge					
	Boys			Girls			Boys			Girls		
	1	3	5	1	3	5	1	3	5	1	3	5
Before Dramatization	47%	33%	20%	22%	56%	22%	53%	47%	0	56%	33%	11%
After Dramatization	0	33%	67%	0	22%	78%	7%	27%	67%	0	67%	33%

Table 2

Frequency of Ratings for the Stories with Nontraditional Female Gender Portrayal Before and After Dramatization

Stories with Nontraditional Female Gender Portrayal	The Paperbag Princess						Horace and Morris, but mostly Dolores					
	Boys			Girls			Boys			Girls		
	1	3	5	1	3	5	1	3	5	1	3	5
Before Dramatization	53%	26%	20%	22%	56%	22%	27%	20%	53%	11%	33%	56%
After Dramatization	20%	26%	53%	0	0	100	0	20.0	80%	0	11%	89%

Crosstabulations of the ratings before and after dramatization showed the ratings after dramatization to be above the diagonal, indicating that all of the participants either rated the story the same or rated it higher after the dramatization. The percentage of children who indicated they liked the story more after enactment was higher for the boys than for the girls with each of the stories. The two stories with the most increase for both sexes were the two realistic fiction short stories with male protagonists.

Table 3

Primary Reasons for Ratings

Title of stories with Nontraditional Gender Role Portrayal	Before Dramatization	After Dramatization
Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores	--One half of these children liked the book because the characters are mice. --The rest of the children who responded positively liked the adventure and friendship described in the book.	--The boys and the girls tended to like the adventure in the story and the friendship between the male characters and the female characters.
Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge	The majority of the boys and girls thought the story was boring because of the old people.	--Primarily, the children liked seeing how Wilfrid was helpful.
The Paper Bag Princess	--The children who responded positively liked it because Elizabeth rescued Prince Ronald. --The boys tended not to like it because Elizabeth rescued Prince Ronald . --The girls tended not to like it because Elizabeth and Ronald didn't get married.	--Boys tended to like seeing the action of the dragon. --Girls liked seeing Elizabeth tell the Prince that he is a bum.
Oliver Button is a Sissy	--The boys tended not to like it because they thought Oliver was a sissy. --The girls tended not to like it because the boys in the story called Oliver a sissy.	--Both boys and girls tended to rate this story higher because they liked seeing the actions.

Conclusions

The results indicate that dramatizing stories affects children's responses to a story in which the characters are portrayed in nontraditional roles in a positive manner, especially boys. It is interesting to note that after dramatizing the stories, the ratings for both of the books portraying nontraditional males increased the most. Children's books portraying nontraditional male characteristics are less common and used less frequently than books portraying nontraditional female characteristics (Rice, 2000b). Also, previous research has indicated that

children are less accepting of nontraditional male characteristics (Rice, 2000a). The written comments of several of the children reflect the manner in which entering the story world affected them. For example, one of the boys' responded, "You got to know the characters by being them."

Educational Importance of the Study

In order to work towards a more just social order, it is important for educators to gain insights into the ways in which they can create spaces for children to expand their definitions of femininity and masculinity beyond stereotypical definitions. Research focusing on gender and literacy practices indicates that literacy practices are a key site for the construction of gender in society; however, this research does not include examining gender and educational drama. This study provides some insights in this area.

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